

Upulvan or Uppalavaṇṇa - the Guardian Deity of Sri Lanka

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Let me begin by confessing that in this article I make no attempt to fix the physical identity of our Upulvan or trace his genealogy. If we endeavor to scan his identity in Sri Lanka today, with the help of literary and other evidence, we are driven to conclude that his genesis lies well outside Sri Lanka, possibly in the primordial soup of mythology in India. This certainly is pre-Buddhistic.

Whatever the historians, sociologists and students of religion from any part of the world have to say about this divinity Upulvan, we have very clear evidence about him from our Sri Lankan documented literary sources which date as far back as 5th or 6th centuries A.D. And for certain, their contents are centuries earlier than their dates of compilation.

The Dīpavaṃsa and the Mahāvaṃsa, reckoned as our earliest National Chronicles to which we refer here, both make specific references to the very first appearance of Upulvan on the Sri Lankan scene. The incident, as these traditions record, whether one takes it as legend or history, is associated with the first Aryan settlement of Sri Lanka under the leadership of Prince Vijaya from North India.

The Buddha, about the time of his passing away [*parinibbāna-samaye*] is said to have declared that a Kṣatriya prince named Vijaya, leaving his homeland of Jambudīpa, and arriving in Sri Lanka, was going to be its king.

Sīhabāhussa'yam putto Vijayo nāma Khattiyo

Laṅkā-dīpaṃ anuppatto jahetvā Jambudīpavhayaṃ

*byākāsi Buddha-seṭṭho so **rājā hessati khattiyo.***

Dpv. IX. vv. 21&22

This is the Dīpavaṃsa of about the 5th century A.D. obviously recording with unquestionable fidelity, a very ancient native tradition, preserved in their ancient religious and literary records which go under the name of Aṭṭhakathā Mahāvāṃsa of the Mahāvihāra. Whatever acid tests one may attempt to apply to them today. this is what the people of Sri Lanka wanted to believe and accept, nearly two thousand years ago, as the genesis and evolution of their cultural *status quo*.

This same report continues to record that the Buddha himself showed concern for the successful and secure establishment of the new kingdom in Sri Lanka and that he called upon Sakka, the king of *devas*, to organize it without delay. In this context, our older Chronicle Dīpavaṃsa refers to him as *devānaṃ issara* in the true Buddhist tradition, without even using the term Indra as in the Indian tradition.

Tato āmantayi Satthā Sakkaṃ devānaṃ issaraṃ

Laṅkā-dīpassa ussukkaṃ mā pamajjittha Kosiya.

loc. cit. v. 23

On hearing the words of the Buddha, Sakka [referred to here once again as *deva-rājā*, *Suṃpati* and also as *Kosiya*, in consonance with Buddhist usage], calls upon the deity Uppalavaṇṇa to take upon himself the security of the island [*dīpaṃ ārakkha-kāraṇaṃ*]. The Dīpavaṃsa is also aware, at the same time, that during this early period the island Lanka was also referred to as Sīhala.

Laṅkā-dīpo ayaṃ āhu sīhena Sīhalā iti.

Dpv. IX. v . 1

This is the name [Sinhala] which the Chinese traveler Fa Hsien of the 5th century A. D. picked up in referring to it as Seng Chia Lo.

Sambuddhassa vaco sutvā devarājā Suṃpati

Uppalavaṇṇassa ācikkhi dīpaṃ ārakkha-kāraṇaṃ.

loc. cit. v. 24

The Deity Uppalavaṇṇa promptly accepted the assignment made to him, and with his hosts of divinities, set about his task.

*Sakkassa vacanaṃ sutvā devaputto mahiddhiko
Laṅkādīpassa ārakkhaṃ sapaṇiso paccupaṭṭhahi.* loc. cit. v. 25

Now over to the Mahāvamsa, our more elegantly written chronicle, deriving its material from the same source as the Dīpavaṃsa [but unavoidably using less-historical extra flourishes], for corroboration of the above statements.

The Buddha, while lying on his death bed [*parinibbāna-mañcaṃhi*] is said to have called upon Sakka, the king of *devas* [*devinda*], to provide security to Vijaya and his people who had by then landed on the island of Sri Lanka. The Buddha foresaw the establishment of his religion in the island.

Paṭiṭṭhissati Devinda Laṅkāyam mama sāsanaṃ. Mhv. VII. v. 4

Immediately on hearing this request of the Buddha, Sakka entrusted the protection of the island and its new immigrants to a divinity by the name of Uppalavaṇṇa. The Mahāvamsa has no hesitation whatsoever in using the word Inda with reference to Sakka [a word directly derived from the name of the violent warring God Indra of Vedic mythology]. The name Uppalavaṇṇa as such is already known to our chroniclers of the 5th 6th centuries, as we have seen above. We shall examine the origin of his name due course.

*Tathāgatassa devindo vaco sutvā'va sādaro
Devass'uppalavaṇṇassa laṅkā-rakkhaṃ samappayi.* Mhv. VII. v.5

Now it is clear that the name Uppalavaṇṇa is already known to both our chroniclers. Above all, he appears a trusted close comrade of Sakka. The following verse No. 6 of the Mahāvamsa [of the same Chapter VII] gives us a valuable bit of information about the location of this divinity when it says that

"Immediately on hearing the words of Sakka, **Uppalavaṇṇa arrived in Sri Lanka** " = *Laṅkaṃ āgama* [possibly from somewhere outside Sri Lanka]. In this early period, perhaps the earliest reference we have relating to this incident, he is not reckoned as a resident of Sri Lanka. He comes to Sri Lanka from India.

Sakkena vuttamatto so Laṅkam āgama sajjukaṃ. loc. cit. v. 6

Vijaya and his people are said to have gone up to him and learnt from him that the name of the island was **Lanka Island**.

Ayaṃ bho ko nu dīpo' ti Laṅkā dīpo' ti so ' bravī. loc. cit. v. 7

One thing is unmistakably clear from this evidence of both our Chronicles that as far as this Divinity Uppalavaṇṇa [Upulvan] is concerned that he emerges from an ocean of distinctly Buddhist identity [although the name Utpalavarṇa may be another early or late epithet of the Vedic God Indra.]. Verse No. 9 of the same Ch. VII. of the Mahavamsa tells us further that **Uppalavanna tied thread** [i.e. *pirit nul* or talismanic *paritta*-charmed holy thread] round the arms of Vijaya and his followers **and went back**.

suttañ ca tesam hatthesu laggetvā nabhasā ' gamā. loc. cit. v. 9

From these reports it becomes quite clear that whatever power Uppalavanna wielded for the protection of the new immigrants to the island, he did so via the power of the Buddhist religion. Further down, verse No. 14 records that an ogress of the island named Kuveni who ruled the land threatened him with death, but he escaped the disaster by the power of the holy thread he had already come to possess via Uppalavanna.

paritta-sutta-tejena bhakkhitum sā na sakkuṇi. loc. cit. v. 14

Now to commence a little bit of historical analysis of this mythical personality

of our Divinity Upulvan alias Uppalavanna. To begin with, his name genetically means 'Of the colour of the [blue] water lily' [Not lotus. mind you !]. In the popular Indian triad of Brahma-Visnu-Shiva, darkness of complexion is ascribed to Visnu, sometimes specifically referred to as being blue in colour. It is perhaps this colour identity which got him identified with the colour of the blue water lily, giving him the name Utpalavarna.

The much older Vedic mythology has also the mighty warring Divinity by the name of Indra. In the hands of the Buddhists, through a gentle process of adaptation and adoption [of Indra], we derive the Buddhist Divinity Sakka [Sakra] who gets the honorary title of King of Devas or *Devanam + inda*, retaining a little bit of the name of his predecessor Indra. In Indian mythology, Indra and Visnu appear to be closely related. Hence the later-appended Visnu gets the additional title Upendra. The record in our Chronicles, the Dipavamsa and the Mahavamsa, showing Sakka and Uppalavanna in close proximity to each other supports this.

It is our firm conviction that it is this nearness of Indra and Visnu to each other in kinship or their close friendship in post-Vedic Indian mythology that brings them together as trusted friends in subsequent Buddhist mythology too. We clearly witness this in the above report of the Dipavamsa and the Mahavamsa, where Sakka on being called upon by the Buddha, is seen directing Uppalavanna to organize the security of Sri Lanka on the arrival Buddhism in the island. We note that Uppalavanna is already a submerged epithet for Visnu elsewhere. Centuries later, perhaps pursuing another distinct line of thinking, Sri Lankans clearly assert that it was to Visnu that the Buddha himself entrusted the guardianship of Sri Lanka.

In its twenty-five centuries of history, we discern Sri Lanka going through many stages of metamorphosis, from an early Buddhist to ultra-Buddhist and even non-Buddhist culture frames. About five hundred years or a little more after the first beginnings of the Mahavamsa, there commenced the writing of a Commentary on the Mahavamsa under the name Vamsatthappakasini or

Mahavamsa Tika. Herein we detect instances of deflected thinking which are incompatible with what we consider to be the original spirit of Buddhist approaches to the solution of human problems in this very life and in lives hereafter.

It is our belief that we cannot make a meaningful approach to revamp our cultural heritage in this country without adequately grasping the process of cultural change we have been through, over the centuries, and the why and the wherefore of it. At the very outset, we clearly indicated how our Chronicles maintain that, as far as cultural history in this country begins, we started with a truly Buddhist pacifist policy of being guarded and protected, in this land of strangers, through entirely Buddhist processes. It was seen to be through non-aggressive power of Buddhist *parittas*, ushered in by none other than the duly appointed Divinity Upulvan. He provided this to Vijaya and his followers and went back home.

We are not surprised that, nearly five hundred years later, in the Mahavamsa Tika referred to above, an emerging vicious tradition smuggles into the statements of the Chronicles some items of ill-gotten illegitimate thinking. We noted earlier that Vijaya and his followers landed in the midst of strangers. They would invariably have resisted the immigrants as invaders and evidently turned hostile to them. The woman leader Kuveni who ruled over the island at the time, through treachery and intrigue, is said to have agreed to massacre all her people, marry the immigrant leader and hand over the country to him. The Mahavamsa reports that all this was achieved through the demoniac power which she possessed. Note Mahavamsa report below.

*Ajje'va yakkhe ghātehi na hi sakkā ito paraṃ
so āhā'dissamāne te ghātessāmi kathaṃ ahaṃ.
Yattha saddaṃ karissāmi tena saddena ghātaya
āyudham **me'nubhāvena** tesaṃ kāye patissati.*

Mhv. VII. vv. 35 & 36

In the face of this clear evidence of the original text of the 5th century where Kuveṇi takes full responsibility for the annihilation of her people, the *yakkha* hosts, [*me'nubhāvena*] the newly emerging Ṭikā tradition of the Mahāvamsa Ṭikā [Vamsatthappakāsinī Vol. I.240] says that it was facilitated through the ritualistic [i.e. *balikamma* or sacrificial] offerings which Vijaya initially made to Uppalavaṇṇa.

...**paṭhamam** eva **Uppalavaṇṇassa balikammakaraṇena** āvudhamathanādi attano nayañ ca sabbam avirajjhivā katvā. [Vamsatthappakāsinī I. 240]. Contrast with this the earlier report from the Mahāvamsa [Mhv. VII. vi. 35 & 36].

What we discover here is obviously the Ṭikā compilers' super-imposing on an ancient event, at least five hundred years anterior to them, of new details of procedure [i.e. *bali-kamma-karaṇa*] which they associate with their own contemporary culture [high or low.]. But we are inclined to believe that these were totally unknown to the immigrants at the time of the event. In the light of what we have discussed above about the uncontaminated, totally Buddhist atmosphere of what Uppalavaṇṇa did by way of providing security to the new immigrants, this newly introduced element of sacrificial performance for the purpose of personal security and success in the murderous encounter with hostile natives [referred to in the Chronicles as *yakkhas*], at the level of Buddhist judgement, descends to no less than total vulgarization. The early Chroniclers, we are nearly certain, envisaged nothing of the sort.

After these two references, we hear almost nothing for centuries about this Divinity Upulvan. He is lost in oblivion. However, he had made a mark somewhere in the minds of some people as a divine personality who could be invoked for assistance by humans, in times of need. This is where we could possibly witness the genesis and the profuse growth of legends relating to this Divinity. From the days of the Buddhist grandeur in Anuradhapura, particularly about the time of the redemption by Duṭṭhagāmanī of the menace created by the hostile invaders, we also hear of the tremendous loyalty and support offered to

the cause of Buddhism by the royal house of Rohana, headed by rulers like Kāka-vaṇṇa-Tissa, father of Duṭṭhagāmanī. We are of the opinion that in the liberation and safeguarding of Buddhism from the inroads of the menacing invaders of the neighboring mainland, Duṭṭhagāmanī was, by all counts, a heaven sent gift. But unfortunately we discover him today cut up beyond recognition, both by interested as well as hostile parties.